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Steel and City

Metallic construction in Rome in the twentieth century

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ABSTRACT
TOPIC 9. DESIGN AND HISTORY (Modernity and Tradition)

The PhD research proposes a reflection about the relationship between the steel construction and the city of twentieth century in Italy and it examines, as an exemplary case, the urban context of Rome. The investigation analyses not only the design of steel buildings and infrastructures realised in a complex urban environment that is rich of historical signs, but it intends to demonstrate the existence of a significant architectural heritage, related to modern technologies that are radically different from the local building tradition.
The couple of terms "steel and city" doesn't mean a common connection between contents and container, but it is considered as a symbiotic relationship between categories that are apparently separated, indeed metallic construction has played an important role for the modernization of cities in the twentieth century and this condition is deeply realised in Rome, where new offices, commercial buildings, and infrastructures, request steel construction for many reasons that are not only functional.
One hundred architectural works with steel structure, realised in Rome in the twentieth century, have been selected for the research and they have been listed in a catalogue, that is ordered not only chronologically, but also according to the different categories of urban morphology and perception. Most of selected works show the influence of international architecture and modern language due to the fact that Rome tries with many difficulties to acquire an imported linguistic code, but it is also evident the effort of architects and engineers to balance the modern language with the historical signs that have been settled over the centuries. In the "Eternal City", that is composed of brick and stone architecture according to popular imagination, the steel construction seems to mark a deep discontinuity compared with the urban context and the research focuses on the results of this dialogue: how steel construction has assumed distinctive features of the city where it is located and which effects have been produced in the urban context following a new figurative lexicon due to the steel technology.
Christian Norberg-Schulz chose Rome as one of the best examples to argue the correspondence between location, settlement and architectural detail in his famous book "Genius Loci", so Rome seems to be the ideal city to analyse how steel technology is able to match the urban context, always suspended between modernity and tradition.